

Special Issue Research Article

## Amulets as Infrastructure: Enabling the Ordinary for Children in Mugum, Western Nepal

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### Abstract

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This article explores the use of amulets on children's bodies, drawing on empirical examples from Mugum in western Nepal and theoretical insights from anthropology of personhood, kinship and infrastructure. Taking four-year old Tashi and his family in Mugum as a starting point, we show how the status of toddlers and small children is "extraordinary"; they are physically fragile, emotionally uncontrolled, and weakly connected, and in need of special protection. In the complex transition to ordinary personhood, amulets serve as one of many "technologies of protection" for children (Garrett 2013, 189). We suggest that amulets act as a stable infrastructure that enables a hope for children to live ordinary lives, and argue that the significance of these means of protection intersects closely with notions of marginality.

### Keywords

Amulets; children; anthropology; infrastructure; protection

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It was September 2017, and we<sup>1</sup> were heading back to our host family in Mugum village, where we had been staying for the last two weeks, while conducting an explorative research trip to the upper Mugu district. Mugu is located between Humla and Dolpo, close to the Tibetan border, and Mugum village was once a busy market place on one of the trans-Himalayan trade routes.<sup>2</sup> These days, lacking road access and involving a threeday walk from the district center, the atmosphere in the village conveys a strong sense of remoteness. In Mugum, villagers talked about the place being half-empty and explained how most people spend a large part of the year elsewhere. These late summer months were pleasant, and the village seemed busy as families were starting to prepare for their seasonal shift of location to their winter residence further south. Walking along the wide riverbank toward the village, we met a young boy and his mother, who were returning from their fields to the north. As we conversed with the mother about their plans to move to the district center, Gamgadhi, later that month and about what things they wanted to bring and leave behind, the young boy, whom we here call Tashi, followed our conversation while playing with a string of objects he wore around his shoulder. The objects looked familiar: a leather pouch with an amulet inside, images of Rinpoches and Buddhas, a little silver box decorated with the eternity symbol, folded paper notes, a thick black lashed thread—all known to protect the carrier against harm and misfortune. Attached to a thick red woolen thread, the objects were hanging on the outside of his jacket, on the right side of his chest. Although a common sight across the Tibetan cultural world, Tashi's amulets were more numerous, heavier, and, importantly, more visible than was usual for a small child.

As part of parents' protective efforts, all children in Mugum shared the practice and experience of wearing amulets (*M. sungnye*<sup>3</sup>). Sometimes visible but usually hidden under the clothes, amulets are part of children's bodies, placed on them a short time after birth and added consecutively



Figure 1: Tashi's string of amulets, worn outside his clothes, clearly visible.

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through childhood and later into adulthood. Yet, when asking for information about how the amulets were placed on the child and about the reasons for and purpose of particular amulets, we often received generic and unspecific answers, as if their value and efficacy were taken for granted, and were hard to articulate in detail. The constant presence of amulets could be understood, we suggest, as serving as an infrastructure of protection in everyday life in Mugum, as in other Tibetan and Himalayan communities.

## Introduction

Being a child, and having been a child, is one of the inherent shared human experiences, in many ways the most ordinary one. Childhoods and child-rearing and caring have been a core interest in anthropology since the inception of the discipline, well-known from Margaret Mead's work on socialization and psychological development in Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali in the 1920s and 1930s (1928; 1931); Raymond Firth's studies of care and learning among children in Tikopia in the 1930s (1936); and Audrey Richard's work on rituals and socialization among Bemba girls in the 1950s (1956)—to give some examples. These early studies and work closer to our times—such as by Christina Toren (1993) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992)—both take children, child-rearing, and childhoods as a lens to study cultural values and social lives in

particular communities (for overviews of anthropological approaches to childhoods and for extensive examples of case studies, see Montgomery 2009 and Lancy 2014).

More recent approaches in ethnographies of childhoods, or, rather, studies of children's lives explore children's own perspectives and give prominent space to their voices. Hence, these take children's experiences as a study in its own right rather than as a lens to sociocultural life (Bluebond-Lagner 1978, James and Prout 1990, James 1993, Lancy 2014). Also, in South Asia, there is a long tradition of studies of children and their lives and experiences (Sarangapati 2003, Behera 2007, Balagopalan 2014, Bowen and Hinchy 2015), focusing on topics such as children and personhood (Carrin 2015); learning and education (Froerer 2012, Lancy, Bock, and Gaskins 2010); and labor, exploitation, and rights (McCarthy 2021).

Despite this long tradition of child studies in anthropology and its adjacent disciplines, childhoods as social and cultural experiences and categories are under-researched in Tibetan studies. Although childhood is often mentioned in passing in monographs from the region (such as Childs 2004, Childs and Namgyal Choedup 2019, Craig 2020, Jacoby 2014, Gerke 2012)<sup>4</sup> there is "no thorough study of children or childhood in Tibet" (Garrett 2013: 199). In Himalayan studies, on the other hand, there are numerous scholarly works about children, focusing mostly on health, including infant mortality, as well as differential childcare (Levine 1987, Miller 1981, Van Vleet 2012), and children at risk (Baker and Panter-Brick 2000). In neither Tibetan nor Himalayan studies is there much research on the classic topics in the anthropology of children and childhoods, such as socialization, personhood, and the coming of age, and children remain marginal in the dominant debates of our regional studies.

The vast literature in cross-cultural childhood studies clearly shows the social and cultural work that goes into "making" children as social beings with the potential for living ordinary lives (Lancy 2014, McCallum 2001, Gregor and Tuzin 2001, Ulturgasheva

2012). How can we explore childhood at the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary in Tibetan and Himalayan studies? How can a focus on individual lives contribute to knowledge about such an intersection?

In this article, we focus on the ritual protection of children as part of the making of personhood. We suggest that amulets serve as forms of infrastructure for Tibetan Buddhist personhoods, connecting and enabling the transitions to ordinary lives for small children. Infrastructures, Bowker and Star write, "disappear almost by definition. The easier they are to use, the harder they are to see" (2000: 33). Amulets, too, we argue, are taken-for-granted techniques of child development, often rendered invisible both by the way they are worn under layers of clothes and are talked about in generic terms. We suggest that exploring collections of amulets can be a way to reveal and reflect on extraordinary events—misfortune, illness, and loss—in children's lives, that is, incidents called "moments of inversion" in infrastructure studies (Chandler 2019). The placing and wearing of amulets can also make visible efforts to secure growth and smooth transitions (such as being named, starting school, shifting locations), and investigating these objects can thus serve as a method to gain new insight on children's lives in general and how the ordinary and extraordinary intersect and blur in childhoods, in particular.

We approach children's amulets from two closely connected angles: 1) the anthropology of personhood and cosmology, or the ontological status of (especially small) children and the ways and techniques of transitioning from that status, and 2) the anthropology of kinship, or the exploration of formative efforts to connect a child to the larger socio-cosmological networks in the Tibetan Buddhist worlds. By engaging in a framework of personhood, cosmology, and kinship, we aim to contribute to the literature on childhood transitions in between the bodily and the spiritual (McCallum 2001, Montgomery 2009, Ulturgasheva 2012, Michelet 2015, Scheper-Hughes 1992).

Taking Tashi and his family in Mugum as a starting point, we argue that the status of toddlers and small children is “extraordinary”—physically fragile, emotionally uncontrolled, and weakly connected; they are ontologically different from older children and, therefore, in need of special protection to transition to what is perceived as an ordinary social status. In this complex transition, amulets serve as one of many “technologies of protection” for children (Garrett 2013: 189). We suggest that they act as a stable infrastructure that enables or produces the hope for children to live ordinary lives, and argue that the significance of these means of protection intersects closely with notions of marginality. We address marginality by exploring the geographical remoteness of Mugum as a factor in the placing and wearing of children’s amulets; describing amulet practices in an area marginal to religious centers and, thus, to the production of powerful amulet ingredients; and by bringing children and childhoods—marginal in Tibetan and Himalayan studies—into focus.

Thus, this article aims to contribute to the rich discussion of the anthropology of children, childhoods, and personhood by describing the placing and wearing of amulets in the early years of life in Mugum as a new ethnographic case study of childhood transitions.

## Methods

This paper is inspired by observations from Fjeld’s fieldworks conducted in different parts of the Tibetan Buddhist world from the mid-1990s onward: in Lhasa and Panam in Central Tibet, in Rebgong in Amdo, and recently in Haa in Bhutan. The ethnographic examples included are from the Fjeld’s research on Mugum communities in Nepal and from Vasstveit’s fieldwork in Dharamsala, India. The wearing of amulets was an integrated part of the research questions of the fieldwork in Dharamsala in 2008 and 2012 and an indirect part of the work with Mugum communities from 2017 onward.

Due to the explicit focus on individual lives in this special issue, the ethnography presented here is from interactions with people from Mugum residing in Mugum village, Jumla, or Kathmandu rather than from any of the other field sites.

Fjeld conducted the fieldwork among the Mugu community in 2017 and 2019. As part of an explorative research trip to upper Mugum in September 2017, Fjeld worked in tandem with Chhorden, a young woman from Mugum village who served as a research assistant and language and cultural translator. Together, we visited and interviewed people in 25 households, including five private gompas. In addition, Chhorden did a household survey of seasonal migration patterns in 29 households in the village.

One of the topics covered in our interviews was women’s and children’s health, including access to health services. The protection of small children was an integral theme in these conversations.<sup>5</sup>

There is a large Mugu community in Kathmandu. Fjeld conducted interviews with Muwas residing there in both 2017 and 2019, first with the assistance of Tashi and later with Mingzom, both young Muwas originally from Mugum village living in Kathmandu. These included interviews with ritual experts and representatives of important *ngakpa* (སྔགས་པ།) households from Mugum. Between visits, Tashi also worked as a research assistant, inquiring about amulet use in families in Kathmandu.

Lastly, in 2019, the Fjeld stayed with the Mugum community in Jumla, again working with Mingzom, who has family there.

In Jumla, we interviewed 15 households about migration histories, including protective practices for bodies and houses, such as the placing and wearing of amulets. In addition, the paper draws on Vasstveit’s fieldwork in Dharamsala in 2008 and 2012, where she worked with families in exile and their use of “power objects,” including amulets. While this research did not focus explicitly on children’s use of amulets and



thus is not reflected in the empirical cases mentioned below, the insight from these observations and conversations about the use of these and other protective objects by adults informs our analysis in this article.

### Growing up in Mugum village

Tashi, the young boy we met in September 2017, lived with his mother and father, two siblings, and a grandmother in one of the houses in the lower part of the village. This was, in many ways, an ordinary Mugum household. At that time, Mugum consisted of approximately 100 inhabited houses, and the vast majority of the residents practiced seasonal migration, moving south in the winter, either to Gamgadhi or Jumla, to Kathmandu, or even abroad. The exceptions to this seasonal migration were the people in the 15 blacksmith households and the two persons who served as caretakers of the two communal gompas, as well as a few elderly people who maintained their private (*ger*, མེར།) gompas themselves. From a poor commoner household, four-year-old Tashi, who was still too young for school, lived with his family throughout the year—Mugum in the winter and Gamgadhi in the summer. Like most Muwas, they shifted back to the village in March, opening their house again, farming their small plots of land, and seeing their two yaks return to the summer pasture. Tashi's parents and his two elderly siblings, who came back from their boarding schools for the occasion, also took part in the search for cordyceps (*yartsa gunbu*, དབྱུང་ཚ་དགུན་འབྱུང།) in June, as most Muwas had done every year from the beginning of the 2000s. Lacking good trade relations themselves, Tashi's family made their income from selling cordyceps to local traders, who then took the goods to sell beyond Mugu district. While around ten of the Mugum households in the village were relatively affluent (due to long histories of trade and business, including *yartsa gunbu* and other medical herbs over the last two decades), most of the households were poor, struggling with both food security and access to clothes and other basic necessities. Although not excluded or marginalized, like the blacksmith families

in the village, Tashi's parents struggled to make ends meet; their income from picking *yartsa gunbu* and other medicinal herbs was limited, their land was small and not very fertile, and they had expenses for three children in Kathmandu boarding schools. Like other villages in the high Himalayas in Nepal, the population of Mugum is gradually decreasing because the younger generation move out for education and do not return after graduation, young adults leave for labor migration, and the elderly either remain in the village or move south with one or more of their adult children (Childs and Namgyal Choeden 2020, Craig 2020). Tashi's family is typical of those returning to Mugum in the summer: parents, their pre-school children, and one elderly grandparent. The reasons for the outmigration are complex, but, in addition to concerns about education and future opportunities, the lack of services in the village is an important contributing factor. Life in the Mugum is precarious and involves high risks, with only partially working healthcare provision or schools and long walking distances to alternative services, and, in 2017, without mobile coverage or access to the Internet.<sup>6</sup> A sensitivity to vulnerability and remoteness was strongly present in conversations with people in the village and influenced child-care practices.

Tashi spent his days playing around the house, roaming the village grounds with other children, going out with his mother, or staying with his grandmother inside the house. Small children had considerable freedom and were not closely monitored by their parents, but Tashi liked to follow his mother, being close to her and helping with chores.<sup>7</sup> He was a careful child, loving and cuddly with his mother and grandmother, whom he slept with alternately, but he could also be loud and rough, especially with his younger sister. Although childcare in Mugum is generally warm and loving, Tashi was scolded harshly by his parents if he misbehaved, such as by spilling food or being careless. Now that he was approaching five years old, his parents expected him to control his body

movements so as not to hurt himself or others or break anything around the house, but they were lenient in terms of letting him roam and do as he pleased. Yet Mugum is geographically remote, with a threeday walk to hospitals or other well-functioning healthcare facilities, and Tashi and other children are vulnerable to accidents as well as illnesses and misfortunes from a range of possible sources, something that parents were very aware of. When speaking about giving birth and raising small children in Mugum, parents commonly and deeply expressed concerns about health and, fundamentally, survival. The notion of the village becoming an increasingly marginal place, lacking road access and health care, strongly informed discussions about children and their childhoods in Mugum.

Growing up with his parents in Mugum, Tashi had, since birth, been part of a social network of kin, neighbors, and friends in the village and beyond, a network that provided connections and care. Mugum's social landscape can be divided into three social categories—simply ranked high, middle, and low—and sometimes referred to by locals as “castes” in English: the ten patrilineages (*gyüpa*, རྒྱུ་པ།), one of which Tashi and his family shared<sup>8</sup>, the lower-ranked *dagre* (M. also called *jela*)<sup>9</sup>; and the lowest-ranked, blacksmiths (*gara*, མགས་པ།). Although people of these three categories did not intermarry and interactions with blacksmiths were strictly socially regulated,<sup>10</sup> they are connected through kinship and marriage,<sup>11</sup> as well as through labor exchange and contracts. An important socio-ritual connection in Mugum is that between the 13 *ngakpa* households (*gerkyi gompa*) and the households of the village. These private gompas, together with the two communal gompas (*yulkyi gompa*)<sup>12</sup> performed important ritual work, both for the village as a whole, the particular households, and their individual members. While the two communal gompas were responsible for the yearly ritual cycle of the village, the private gompas provided ritual work, labor, and care for the individual households and their members. The relations between the households and the

private gompas have spanned generations, and often, but not always, they share patrilineage. All households are connected to a *ngakpa* or lama in a private gompa, who is responsible for all ritual events in the yearly cycle of a household, including the ritual care for newborn and smaller children.<sup>13</sup>

Tashi's house was served by one lama who lived in the upper part of the Mugum village, and as a member of the household, Tashi received protection from the lama's ritual work for them. These were biannual *yang* (ལྔ་ཡང་།) rituals, new year's cleansings, harvest rituals, cleansings after birth and death, rituals as responses to illness and misfortune, as well as predictions (*mo*, མོ།) to remove potential obstacles before new events, such as trade, relocation, or school start. Adults and children are embedded in these networks of ritual protection that aim to reduce harm and enhance well-being and growth and all things good, including good luck for the *yartsa gunbu* season. The amulets that Tashi wore were objects that commonly circulate within and beyond these socio-cosmological networks of households in the Mugum community, in and beyond the village itself, and these serve, we will show, as stable infrastructures of protection for children residing in the village. Moreover, we suggest that, as material objects that feel heavy when they are worn, amulets work as mnemonic devices for the children, reminding them of these social and religious networks that they are embedded in through their household and their village belonging.

### Amulets, Taken-for-grantedness and Efficacy

The wearing of amulets, also called charms and talismans, is common throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world (Skorupski 1983, Gentry 2017, Bellezza 1998, Douglas 1998, Havnevik 1989, as well as older texts such as Hildburgh 1909, Waddell 1956).<sup>14</sup> The generic terms used to describe amulets, or protective objects, vary across the Tibetan cultural sphere; in Mugum, people used *sung nye*, while in Shigatse we often heard *sungkhor* (སུང་ལོ་ཐོར་།), and in Dharamsala the term was *tunga* (a variant of *sungba*, སུང་





moreover, be conjured into an object or a substance, turning them into power objects. It is a potency that has an effect on beings and the environment. *Jin* affects the environment, any substance, or being, which in turn produces the “empowered” (*jinten*) (Gerke 2012: 232, Gayley 2007: 465–466, Huber 1999: 15). Thus, it can be understood as an active force that operates on the environment and on those who encounter it (Gayley 2007: fn. 19).

Mugum children, like adults, often wear amulets under their clothes, around their necks, or inside their shirts or jackets. When staying in local households across Tibet, India, and Bhutan, we have seen many examples of children’s daily embodied interaction with amulets. Returning from school for lunch, for example, and as part of removing their school uniforms for the break, we have seen how children also remove their string of amulets and carefully hang them somewhere inside the house,



Figure 2: Men-Tsee-Khang in Dharamsala: the making of sungkhor, often referred to as “the yellow wheel of Manjushri,” “jam dpal dbyangs ser khor,” see Vasstveit 2014. © Inger K. Vasstveit.



Figure 3: A string of amulets worn by an adult woman in Dharamsala. © Inger K. Vasstveit.



Figure 4: *Chag né*, blessed seeds that are used alone as protective objects or added to amulets, circulating as gifts among Tibetans in India. © Inger K. Vasstveit.

often high up on the wall, before putting them back on when preparing to go outside again. In these daily movements of acts of placing the amulets on and off the body, the everyday sensibilities of wearing these objects, the sense of them being part of the body, appear to become naturalized and normalized. In Tashi’s case, he wore his amulets outside his cotton jacket every time we saw him in the house and in the village. The string was tight over his shoulder, lying close to his chest; the weight and tightness surely noticeable for him. One day we saw him running and jumping from stones with other children, the amulets closely following his body movements.









continued: “Some are from lamas visiting Mugum, some from lamas in Kathmandu. I got one after an attack by a demon (*dré*, འདྲེ), and one is against harm (*nöba*).”

“Which one did you get after the *dre* attack?” we asked. But she did not know. However, she showed us two rings on her fingers and called them *nöba* stoppers, rings we had also seen in Mugum village (see Figure 11). “How about the amulets that stop *nöba*? Do you remember which ones they are?” we continued. Again, she was uncertain about the specifics of the individual amulets and their origins. Yet she did not doubt the efficacy and value of the amulets; rather, they were objects she showed and talked about with joy and fondness, something she kept close to her body.



Figure 9: An old Muwa woman in Jumla showing us her collection of amulets.  
© Heidi Fjeld



Figure 10: Harm-stopping rings, Mugum.  
© Heidi Fjeld



Figure 11: Amulets placed on a woman's back while working in the fields, Mugum.  
© Heidi Fjeld

In summary, Mugum children's use of amulets has six characteristics.

1. Amulets, including protective cords, are added to children's bodies on the third day after birth, or at least within the first week.
2. Amulets are mostly, but not always, prophylactic protection against future harm, but the distinction between protection and treatment is often blurred.
3. Amulets are cumulatively added to a child's body, increasing with the perceived vulnerability, which is assessed by previous events (such as illness and death of siblings, pregnancy problems, but also the geographical and topographical remoteness).
4. The first amulets used are made and provided by the lama connected to and serving the child's household, who is often from the same patrilineage, while later amulets are made and provided by lamas from a wider network.



5. Amulets are used in combination with other objects and employed alongside other protective measures and events.
6. Children's amulets receive their efficacy from religious, rather than medical, origin and association.

### Amulets and Embodied Boundaries

The amulets are power objects in the broadest sense of the term. As Gentry writes, they “have the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behaviors of others or the course of events” (Gentry 2017: 12). Amulets, as other “objects transformed by mantra” (*damdzé*), have the capacity of “binding those who encounter them via the senses to one another, to the substances themselves, and through the substances to their masters” (ibid.: 11). Their functions can be on a spectrum from the soteriological, enabling liberation as mentioned above, to the pragmatic (Cabezón 2010: 21),<sup>18</sup> i.e., protecting against illness or physical pain, but also assisting with mundane processes such as enhancing chances of winning competitions, getting admitted into schools, or obtaining a visa to the US. Children's amulets are on the pragmatic end of the spectrum, strongly interconnected with illness and well-being, but also, as we will show, with strength, growth, transitions, and subjectivities.

In one of the few publications on children's protection in Tibetan texts, *What Children Need*, Frances Garrett (2013) explores what she calls “technologies of protection for children” in detail, as these are presented primarily in a collection of older and contemporary medical textbooks, all still in use at her time of writing. *Healing Children*, the contemporary book she describes, is based on, or corresponds to, chapters 71, 72, and 73 of the *Instructional Tantra*, the third book of the *Four Tantra* (*Gyuzhi*), the core text of traditional Tibetan medicine (Sowa Rigpa). These chapters deal with the care of children from birth to early childhood and describe a range of protective measures to be employed from birth, categorized into feeding, physically manipulating bodies, the wearing of objects, and the staging of

rituals: “feeding of pills, soups, butter, beers, or texts to children, parents, or deities; physically manipulating techniques, such as surgery, washing, anointing, fumigating, or massaging; the wearing of all manners of amulets, talismans, strings, papers, ointments, or letters; the theatrical staging of elaborate hospitality or ransom dramas” (2013: 183). The wearing of amulets is thus one of many such technologies of protection for children, often described together with the wearing of other objects such as talismans, strings, papers, ointments, or letters (Brown et al. 2007). In an often-cited paper, Thubten Sangay 2011 [1984] also describes a very broad range of ritual and care interventions for small children.<sup>19</sup>

Worn objects, Garrett notes, build a “second skin,”<sup>20</sup> a “defensive armor,” around the baby, on the body itself, just as protective objects do for the house in which the baby lives. With this, she writes, “even babies are given power over harmful forces” (2013: 186).<sup>21</sup> The cultural comparison between bodies and houses is well known in anthropology, especially in terms of protective measures. Efforts to protect openings, of houses and especially of female bodies, are often based on overlapping cultural ideas and motivations (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). There are indeed many similarities between bodies and houses in Tibetan Buddhist communities, too. In one of Fjeld's previous studies based on ethnography from rural Central Tibet, she has written about how residents, through embodied everyday practices including offerings and hospitality, create and reproduce the house as a ritually efficacious space—a tamed Buddhist space—that enables proper and controlled relationality (and sociality) between humans and non-humans. Such ordering of space enables protection, which, in the case of the house and its residents, contributes to enhancing fertility and growth on the one hand and reducing harm, misfortune, and pollution on the other. The house as such is a microcosm, placing humans and non-humans in an ontological order and facilitating proper and friendly relations between them. Ordering the house and acting accordingly, we have argued,

enables ritual efficacy within the space of the house. This efficacy is existential in a state of ontological continuity where the world is shared by humans, animals, spirits, demons, and deities, as well as corporeal, semi-corporeal, and non-corporeal beings and forces. Much ritual activity in Tibetan communities is aimed at taming the local deities and maintaining proper relations between humans and non-humans, and the house is a crucial space in which an extended sociality unfolds and is explained and controlled (Fjeld and Lindskog 2017, Fjeld 2022).



Figure 12: The local protector of Mugum village. © Heidi Fjeld

Tashi and his family, and other Mugum residents, share a similar ontology of potential “cosmological collapse,” as Da Col called it (2012: 75), in which harm (*nöba*) easily passes from nonhuman to the human world. Moreover, the remoteness and marginality of Mugum, in which state services are notable by their absence, inform the perception that small children’s lives are particularly precarious and vulnerable and thus in need of protection. As the house is marked as a tamed Buddhist space

through architecture, interior ordering of the area, as well as ritual practice and the marking of the outer openings, amulets, we suggest, have the power to transform and uphold the child’s body into a ritually efficacious space, i.e., a space where Buddhist powers work. Gentry, discussing power objects more broadly, describes an underlying “ritual sensibility, or ethos,” that is built on “a dispositional tendency... formed from the creation and operation within a specialized space where the boundaries between the materiality of the object-world and the immateriality of the subject-world are blurred to enable a controlled fluidity of power between human and non-human domains” (2017: 6). It is in such specialized spaces that ritual masters operate, he argues, and power objects—amulets—play important roles in the blurring of boundaries between the material/objective and the immaterial/subjective in these practices.

Material objects, like amulets, also work on children’s bodies, forming subjectivity while blurring boundaries within such specialized spaces, creating new body-object constellations. The material turn in religious studies shifts emphasis toward what bodies and things do, on the practices that put them to work together, and on the epistemological and aesthetic paradigms that organize bodily experience of things (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Within this material framework, the production and wearing of amulets can be seen as what Warnier calls a “technology,” i.e., as “traditional and efficacious action” on matter and human beings (Warnier 2009: 463). Technology here means practices or performances rather than ready-made things, and the carrying of amulets on the body makes them an empowering technology in a precarious, vulnerable childhood. However, through perception, motion, and emotions—what Warnier terms “sensori-motor conducts”—the objects also become incorporated in the body, thus producing a subject. A subject, then, he writes, is a subject-with-its-object in motion (ibid.: 465). In the following, we turn to the role of amulets in childhood transitions and in the formation of subjectivity and personhood.

## Amulets as Material and Affective Infrastructure

In the anthropology and sociology of childhood, there has been a paradigmatic shift in both the research questions asked and the ontological status of children studied. As mentioned above, earlier studies of children often had as their starting point that children are vulnerable and in need of protection on the one hand and, on the other, they are “merely becoming” rather than “already being” (Garzia-Sanchez 2018: 172). These earlier approaches have been critiqued for being “ethnocentric and classed” (ibid.), based on European and North American notions of childhoods that see children primarily as persons in need of care while they are transitioning to adulthood. Critics argue that these approaches blinded scholars to the many ways that children play active roles in their lives, including being caregivers as well as receivers. Recent approaches thus emphasize children’s agency more strongly (Montgomery 2009, Lancy 2014). However, it is outside the scope of this article to discuss children as caregivers or taking other active roles as participants in local communities.

Protective amulets enable us to revisit children’s ontological status and development of personhood, issues that remain central to the anthropology of childhood and cross-cultural studies of children more broadly, contributing Tibetan and Himalayan perspectives to the existing literature (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, Montgomery 2009). Children are not merely becoming adults but are going through inherent transitions from birth into and through childhood, through adults’ social and cosmological interventions (McCallum 2001, Ulturgasheva 2012, see also Montgomery 2009 for examples). The placing and wearing of amulets, we suggest, adds an interesting angle to these studies, showing how power objects are essential to childhood transitions in Tibetan and Himalayan communities. This brings us back to the question of the role of amulets in the landscape of protective measures for children.

What roles do amulets play in childhood during the transition from margin to center, from extraordinary to ordinary? What is particular about amulets when used on children’s bodies? Aude Michelet’s paper (2015) on the care practices and personhood of young children among Tibetan Buddhists (Halh) in Mongolia provides an interesting comparison to the ontological status of children in Tibet and its borderlands. Michelet describes the multifaceted transition from younger to older children in Mongolia. She analyzes the privileged status—sometimes called “kingly status”—of “young children” (babies, toddlers, up to 3–4 years) and the radically different approaches to the care they receive as they grow older, and show how adults spoil young children, treating them as kings and making sure their needs are met. Young children are not encouraged to control their desires (such as refusing to share with others). Moreover, they are not corrected, and never scolded.

Michelet shows how physical frailty, emotional sensitivity, and inherent virtue converge to give them this privileged status (2015: 289). A small child has a fragile body-mind and uncontrollable desires; they are emotionally sensitive and cannot control fear, which leaves them highly at risk for demon attacks.<sup>22</sup> They are “without sin,” and so making them happy is a virtuous deed.<sup>23</sup> Michelet argues that the transition from privileged status to an older, non-exceptional child is not through one rite of passage (in Mongolia commonly described as the hair-cutting ritual), but rather through everyday practices that address the different elements of a child’s personhood, involving different timelines.

Physical frailty changes when the body grows stronger; emotional sensitivity changes with an increasing ability to control fear; and the capacity to understand and follow rules changes the development of language, an indication of intellectual maturity. These changes are different processes; they are individual and do not happen at the same time.

Tashi and other children in Mugum and, we believe, in many communities in the



Tibetan cultural world, experience a similar care pattern, although, of course, it is not identical. The beginning of life is fragile in Mugum. The vast majority of women give birth at home with a female relative, far away from skilled birth attendants or more advanced healthcare. The infant mortality rates are high, and many women have experienced losing one or several children, either through stillbirth or during the first year. Tashi's mother had not lost children, but she also talked about the fear haunting the first period of a baby's life. During the first years of a child's life, the body is seen to be fragile. The body, especially the bones, is still soft, and the baby (and its mother) is very sensitive to cold. Moreover, the child's emotions are uncontrolled, and they are at life's most vulnerable point in terms of being affected by various possible external harms. In addition, small children are only partially socio-cosmologically connected and thus weakly protected. Although less elaborately and explicitly than in Mongolia, newborns, toddlers, and small children in Mugum are held outside the spotlight through a range of care practices informed by an "etic of non-attention," as Empson calls it (in Michelet 2015). These practices include secrecy around pregnancy, applying soot when taking the baby outside, giving the baby an ugly name, and making the baby less attractive to potential sources of harm—all common practices in Mugum—and elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural world.

The inclusion of a child into a community or into society, the marking of social personhood, has often been described as *one* ritual event, such as the three days blessing (Diemberger 1993), or the *bangsöl* (བང་གསོལ།) in Tibetan and Himalayan communities. However, we know that there are great regional variations in how children's personhoods are considered, often depending on age. For example, in Panam in Central Tibet, the dead bodies of stillborn and very small babies are placed in a clay container and kept in the house until the next birth, while the bodies of slightly older children are placed on a mountaintop or ritually marked in the household. Similar

to Michelet's analysis from Mongolia, we suggest that in Mugum and in other communities across the Tibetan cultural world, social inclusion of children could fruitfully be seen as a complex processual transition that involves different elements of personhood at different timelines.

Why does this matter when thinking about children's amulets? Importantly, it frames amulets and the broader landscape of protective care within the issue of temporality. Childhood transitions involve elements with inherently different timelines—body, emotional, and moral changes—and these are managed through a range of episodic care practices (events), including feeding, manipulating, and staging ritual events, such as elaborate ransom rituals and *pecha* readings (Garrett 2013). The wearing of amulets, on the other hand, involves a different temporality; they are stable objects, providing a continuous effect on the child's body. On a side note, amulets are also more accessible, especially in rural areas. The inequity in access to protection measures is striking; the technologies of protection described in texts and recommended by experts are complex, extensive, and expensive, and clearly not available to many. The expense of rituals was an open concern in Mugum communities, both in Mugum village and Jumla, where only the bigger trade households had the capacity to stage larger rituals for individual members.

In this frame, we argue that amulets can be seen as the infrastructure of Tibetan Buddhist personhood and of childhood transitions from extraordinary to ordinary status. This helps explain the wide use of the objects on children's bodies. Amulets, as infrastructure, are part of the woodwork of embodied persons in a world shared by humans and non-humans. This world is an ontology of potential cosmological collapse, entangled with the way of life where Buddhist powers enable, or support, a good life and a full life course. Putting a child's body in touch with these objects and transforming the body into a ritually efficacious space allows for a "controlled fluidity

of power,” to use Gentry’s words (2017, 6), enabling power to move from the religious domain onto the subjective body.

Providing an extra layer of skin, amulets become a part of the child’s body. Inspired by Chandler (2019), we suggest that amulets, in the pragmatic, not the soteriological sense of use, are infrastructure in two different ways: material and affective. Amulets serve as material infrastructure, enabling the protection of children in resource-limited settings, and are more extensively used when there is a lack of health systems or other social services for children. Parents in Mugum openly recognize the extensive precarity their children potentially face, which is why Tashi and other children in Mugum wear much more elaborate amulets than Muwa children do in Jumla or Kathmandu.

More importantly, amulets are affective infrastructure, that is, objects that enable and define relations—not only between the child and its parents, local and regional religious experts, the community, root lamas, and other relevant persons—but also between the child and potentially harmful forces and substances and Buddhist protective powers, in their local place and beyond. Gentry, writing mostly about amulets as objects of liberation in advanced tantra, describes heated debates about whether amulets have these soteriological powers or whether they merely serve as mnemonic devices, reminding the wearer of his or her religious practice.<sup>24</sup> As affective infrastructure, children’s (pragmatic) amulets can also serve as mnemonic devices of this socio-cosmological connectivity for the children as well. The weight of the amulets can be a reminder not only of religious practice but also of the network of which the children are part. Although this is not the main purpose of the placing and wearing of amulets on children, it can, we suggest, serve this affective purpose through the materiality of the objects. Moreover, we heard, both in Mugum and also among adults in Dharamsala, that people “felt better” when using amulets. Thus, the amulets not only have an emotional effect,

they are also felt to work and provide real protection.

Amulets establish continuous connections, as opposed to an episodic protection of a different temporality. They produce a hope of an ordinary life, of a smooth transition from an infant/toddler to a small child to a less fragile, older child with substantial and material connections to a wider network. As a technology, amulets are efficacious and act on the subjects themselves by shaping and transforming their subjectivities.

## Conclusion

Placed and worn on the body, amulets can transform and uphold the child’s body as a ritually efficacious space, a place that can be protected by Buddhist forces. The practice of placing and wearing amulets on children’s bodies in Mugum is shared by many Tibetan and Himalayan communities, albeit with regional variations. Amulets are put on children’s bodies shortly after birth and are successively added to the body. Often, these are prophylactic rather than treatments. In precarious settings, amulets are more elaborate. They are often made and provided by local and regional lamas in the wider network of the child’s household. Amulets are not used as the sole protective measure for a child, but are affordable tools to keep religious powers effective in a landscape of extensive and expensive protective measures. Like many parents in Mugum, Tashi’s mother spoke of her son’s amulets in ways that did not detail their expected effect, the source of their powers, or their potency and efficacy. This absence of expressed details—or rather, the presence of a sense of taken-for-grantedness about the efficacy of amulets—resonates with the notion of amulets as infrastructure.

We have argued that amulets can be seen as part of the woodwork of Tibetan Buddhist personhood and being-in-the-world and are important tools to assist the range of childhood transitions. Amulets are both material and affective infrastructures; they maintain relationality and connections between a child and their socio-cosmological networks and a ritual connectedness of importance

in a setting of precarity and vulnerability. Amulets serve as infrastructures of care in a setting of marginalization, remoteness, and the absence of health and other services. Explanations of amulet use have infrastructural elements founded in the entanglements of *jinlab*, *wang*, potency, and efficacy, materializing a form of efficacious infrastructure.

These findings highlight an important methodological point that we wish to end with. As infrastructures often remain invisible, they are taken for granted when they work. The value of prolonged engagement in a community becomes obvious to access what Chandler (2019), following Bowker and Star, calls “moments of inversion” of the status quo. By following individual lives, observing how amulets circulate in everyday and extraordinary events, and witnessing moments of inversion, such as illness, misfortune, or embarking on a new path, one can uncover the details of placing and using amulets. Being present at these moments might be the best way to unpack the nuances of amulets on children’s embodied persons and add to the knowledge of everyday religious protective practices.

More research is needed into Tibetan and Himalayan childhoods. Such research should incorporate children’s perspectives and voices. Focusing on the uses of amulets can yield new insight into not only childhoods but also personhood, ritual efficacy, health, and well-being.

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 Endnotes

1. The first author, Chhorden, research assistant from Mugum, and Hira Nepali, a local culture and art entrepreneur and art center director.
2. According to Lama Trinley Gyatso's local history book *Mugum* (2011), Mugum was initially inhabited by Zhang Zhung, Tibetans, and Mongolians some 800 years ago and was ruled first by Purang, then the Jumla king, and later the Gorkhas.
3. The language spoken in Mugum, *Muké*, shares many words and structures with Tibetan, yet is a distinct dialect. Members of the community use different transliteration systems for *Muké*, including Devanagari, Tibetan script, and Latin letters, depending on their education. We provide the Tibetan for standardized shared terms, such as *yartsa gunbu* and *jinlab*, but give only phonetics with Latin letters for *Muké* words to avoid Tibetanizing the local dialect. *Muké* words are marked with an M.
4. Writing for a non-academic audience, Brown, Farwell, and Nyarongsha (1997) describe Tibetan parenthood and childcare practices from studies with Tibetans in exile in India and Ladakh.
5. In addition, three MA students in the *International Community Health* program at the University of Oslo, all from Nepal and supervised by Fjeld, conducted fieldwork in upper Mugu from 2018 to 2020, focusing on maternal and infant health and elderly nutrition, adding insights into the protection of small children in the region. See Shrestha 2020 and Karki 2019 for information relevant to children.
6. The phone connection was reopened in 2018.
7. See Rogoff 2003 and Lancy 2014 for cross-cultural examples of children with high degrees of freedom growing up in non-western societies.
8. Known as Khamen, Trawo, Thuwo, Aljen, Changma, Tsowa, Sakpa, Choita, Trietri, and Seltsa.
9. There are only three *dagre* (*jela*, spelling unclear) households in the village, and this category needs to be explored further.
10. All the villagers we spoke to explained that the *gara* are the poorest of the poor.
11. People from Mugum village practice endogamous marriages, (mostly arranged) virilocal monogamy, and has no history of polygamy.
12. Known as Serkhang and Labrang.
13. The lamas usually reside in the village, and in the event of their absence, other community lamas take up their obligations, making ritual services easily accessible to the villagers.
14. Amulets are well known in other Buddhist traditions; see Tambiah 1984 for one example.
15. *Tunga* might be a variant of *tu ngag*, from *tu* (*mthu*) (magical powers) and *ngag* (mantra), or a variant of *sungba* (protection).
16. According to Huber, *byin* is one of the attributes associated with the old Tibetan kings. The pre-Buddhist divine king possessed *byin* as a “personal property and quality of this physical body” in the sense of “splendor” and “glory” (Huber 1999: 90, Gerke 2012: 232).
17. Havnevik has pointed out that in early Buddhism and the classical yoga system, displaying and clinging to “magical powers” was an obstacle on the path to reach the final goal of liberation; however, in tantric Buddhism, a more positive attitude toward attainment of potent powers is more evident (1989: 66).
18. Amulets and pills are examples of how the lines between the soteriological and pragmatic rituals are blurred, or “fuzzy.” They can protect against harm in the present but are often also touted as being capable of granting liberation through merely wearing and ingesting them, respectively. The efficacy of pragmatic amulets is legitimized by being connected to or associated with the soteriological aspects (Cabezón 2010: 21).
19. There was one Sowa Rigpa doctor in Mugum village, but he did not make or provide amulets to children. Amulets were associated with local and regional religious, rather than medical, experts.
20. She takes the notion of a “second skin,” “through which the performative agency of the wearer is protected and enhanced,” from Richard's study of clothing and war (Richard in Garrett 2013: 203).

21. Gentry also notes in his book on Sokdokpa's life and writings that "the thread running throughout much of Sokdokpa's activities in the diverse areas of medicine, literary production, ritual, and vision quest was his concern with protecting borders—bodily, sectarian, territorial—against threats of external attacks" (2017: 3).

22. Small children, she writes, can see supernatural beings, as because demons attack through fear, their inability to control emotions is an important part of their vulnerability.

23. These deeds, including handling out sweets to children, produce *hishig* and small children (like the elderly) are "vessels" of fortune. Although *hishig* and *yang* share many similarities, we have not seen *yang* being connected to small children in this way in the Tibetan communities in which we have worked.

24. Gentry's main concern is about the nature of liberate-through-wearing amulets (*btags grol*) and Sokdokpa's debates on this question of the power of the amulets. The position in the debate is whether the amulet serves as a mnemonic device (to practice advanced tantra) or whether the object has the power to liberate in itself. He argues that the amulets work on three levels: in the pragmatic sphere of illness and physical pain, in the karmic sphere of delivery from negative rebirth, and in the soteriological goal of freedom from samsara (2017).

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